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These are the women leading China's wine revolution

Matilde Gattoni, Matilde Gattoni 2020-01-24

1/7 SLIDES

A wine-tasting session takes place at Chateau Coppens' estate in China. (Matilde Gattoni)

The morning sun is already high in the translucent sky, and a gentle, cooling breeze sweeps the endless plains on the outskirts of Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia in China.

As the mist slowly evaporates to expose a breathtaking view of the rugged Helan Mountains, scores of women dressed in jeans, light jumpers and colorful head veils crouch along rows of vines, expertly cutting the dark-colored, ripe grapes and collecting them in green plastic cases. It's harvest time, the most important period of the year in this small autonomous region at the gate of the Gobi Desert.

Ningxia is the hidden gem of north-central China. Looking at its majestic peaks and orderly vines stretching as far as the eye can see, it is difficult to imagine that a little more than 70 years ago, the region was just a forbidding stretch of sand inhabited by subsistence

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2/7 SLIDES

Several workers harvest grapes at Helen Qinghai Vineyard in Ningxia, China. (Matilde Gattoni)

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3/7 SLIDES

Zhang Jing, 45, co-founder and winemaker at Helan Qingxin Vineyard, works in the laboratory. (Matilde Gattori)

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4/7 SLIDES

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Zhou Shuzhen, 57, is one of the best winemakers in Ningxia. She has been involved in the Chinese wine industry since the start of the 1980s. Although I have won international awards and gained recognition from experts, I cannot say I am proud of my achievements because winemaking is an endless study," she says. "As the vines of the region get older, there are still a lot of things I can learn and improve in the future." (Matilde Gattori)

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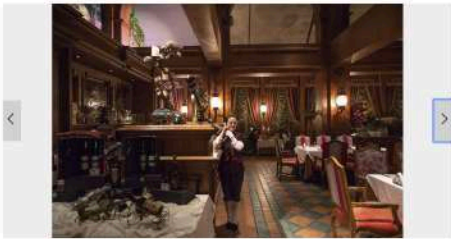
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SLIP SURGE
A woman answers the phone at East Wine Cellar, a restaurant in Beijing with a cellar housing more than 10,000 bottles of top international and Chinese wines. (MATILDE GATTORI)

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6/7 SLIDES

The fermentation room of Pigeon Hill Winery in Ningxia, China. With more than 1,200 hectares of vines, Pigeon Hill is one of the largest wineries in the region. Thanks to its total bank capacity of 4,000 tons, it can produce up to 5 million bottles per year of high-quality, low-proof commercial wine. (Matilde Gattori)

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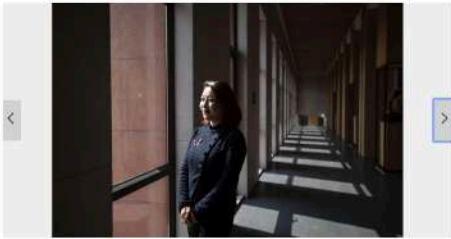
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TIP SLURDS

Lily Zheng, 48, owns Copperwin (she with her husband). In 2012, the couple was about to buy a winery in France but was persuaded to invest in Ningxia by a local wine expert. Lily relocated from Hong Kong to Yinchuan to launch and promote her chateau. (Matilde Gattori)

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1/5 SLIDES Full Screen

Women manually transfer wine into oak barrels at the Pigeon Hill winery in Ningxia. (Marta Gertler)

Although China has several wine producing regions, Ningxia has long been identified by local and international experts as the best, thanks to an exceptional combination of sandy and dry terroir, high altitude, long sunshine hours and low precipitation, which significantly reduce the need for pesticides. Around 90 percent of Ningxia's wine production focuses on red, with cabernet sauvignon as the most popular variety (others include merlot, marselan, malbec, shiraz, pinot noir and, for white wine, chardonnay and Italian riesling). The quality is surprisingly good considering that the industry is new and that most of the vines are less than 20 years old. What Ningxia wines still lack in complexity and structure is compensated by their fruitiness, freshness and minerality, which could become the region's defining characteristics. "Our wines need to express the personality of Ningxia," says Zhang animatedly. "They have to find their own way rather than imitate the European or the New World ones."

Yet producing wine in Ningxia still comes with significant challenges. Vines are buried every winter to survive the frigid temperatures — which can drop to minus 27 degrees

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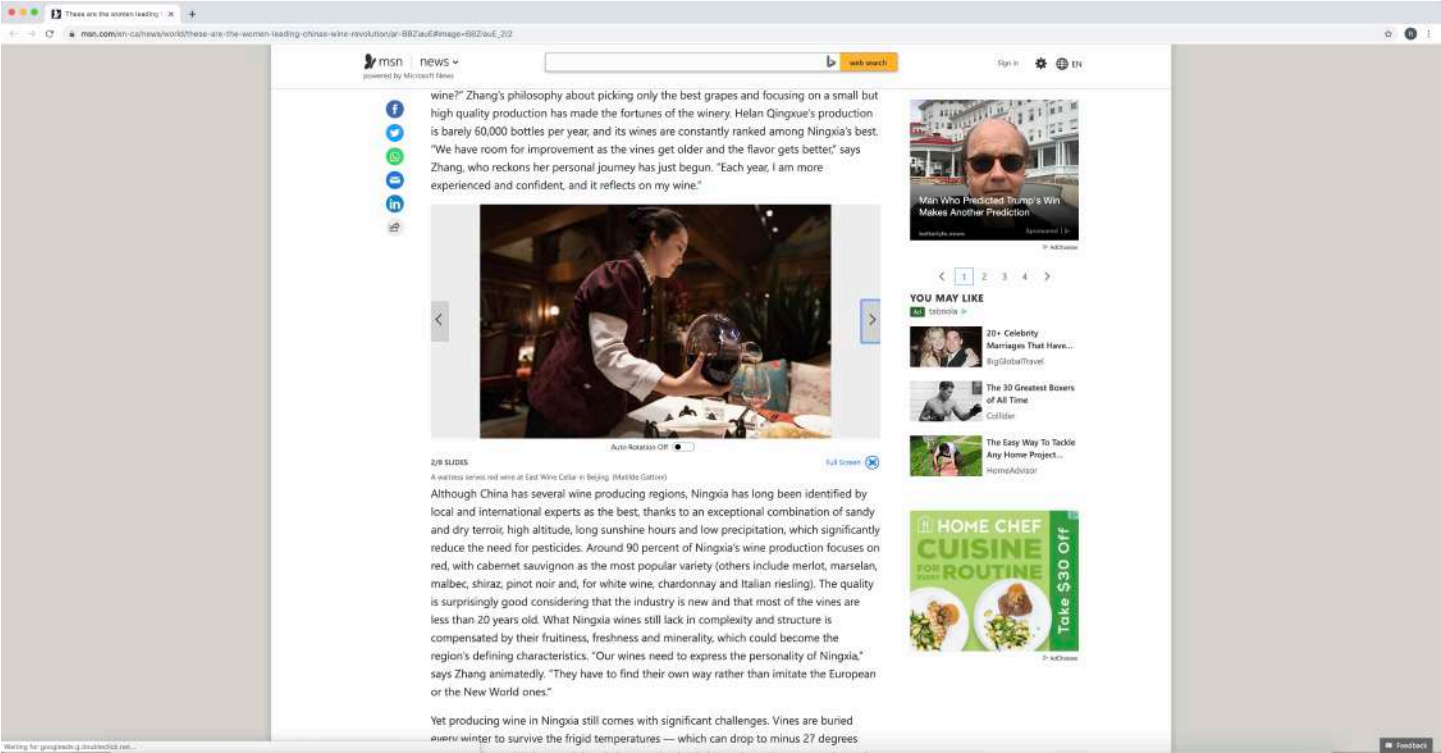
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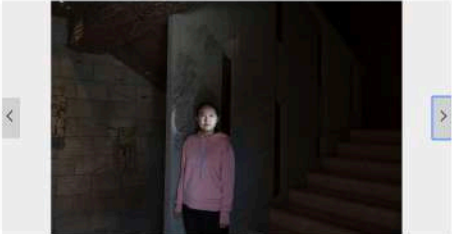
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1/8 SLIDES

Yuan Yuan, 26, is the owner and manager of Chateau Zhihu Yuan's, one of the most beautiful wineries in Ningxia. "Our winery was built in Chinese style because wine is not only a Western product," she said. "China has been producing wine for thousands of years, and we wanted to highlight it as part of our history." (Meride Gutson)

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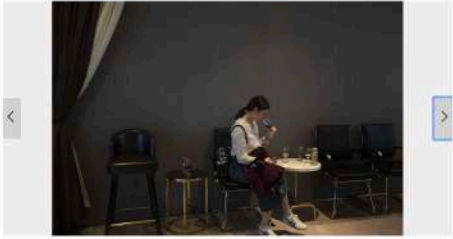
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4/8 SLIDES

A Chinese official enjoying a wine-tasting session at Chateau Helan in Ningxia. The chateau was built in 2016 by an Italian designer at a cost of 23 million euros. It belongs to Helan Group, one of the biggest manufacturers of electric appliances in China. (Shutterstock)

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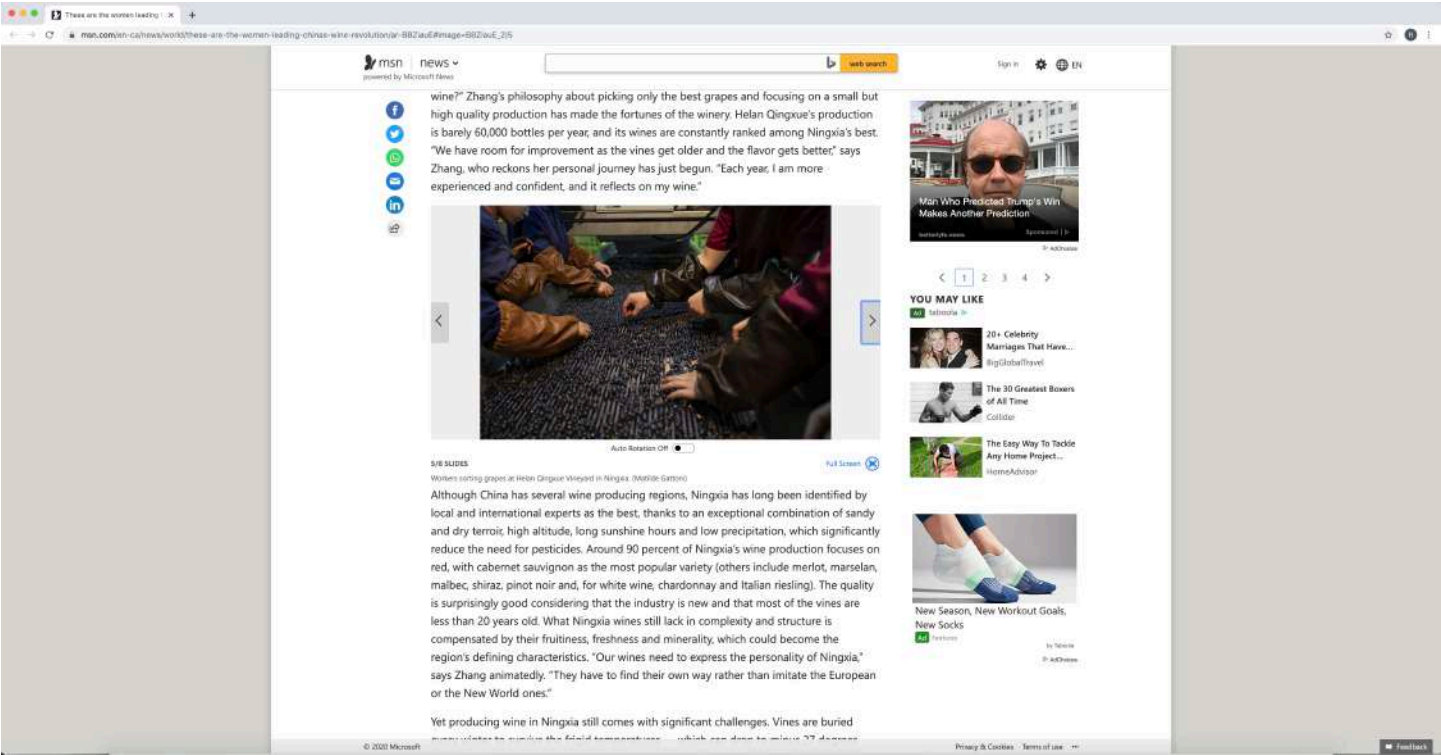
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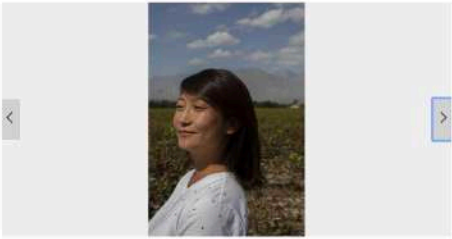
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4/5 SLIDES

Gao Yuan, nicknamed Emma, 42, is the co-owner of Silver Heights. Gao opened her winery in the 2000s using all of her mother's savings. Today, Silver Heights' wines are sold all over China and are recognized as among Ningxia's best. (Mikaela Gattuso)

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7/8 SLIDES

Visitors from Hong Kong take a selfie in the vineyard of Copower Jialu during the opening of the chateau. (Maitake Gattuso)

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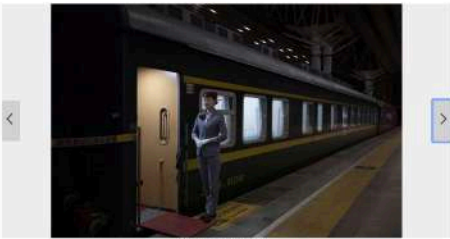
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8/8 SLIDES

In August 2018, China inaugurated a wine train connecting Beijing to the wine producing region of Ningxia. China's interest in wine rose in the late '90s after state leaders praised its benefits in comparison with traditional grain-based liquors. (Markle Guttent)

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